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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: OUYAHIA INCREASINGLY SEEN AS BOUTEFLIKA'S LIKELY
SUCCESSOR

REF: A. ALGIERS 282

[1](#)B. ALGIERS 30

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: Three reliable observers of Algerian politics have told us recently that Major General Mohamed Mediene, the powerful head of the intelligence and security services, is working to favor former Prime Minister Ouyahia as the eventual successor to President Bouteflika. Their opinions vary as to whether Ouyahia will become Bouteflika's heir apparent by returning to the prime ministry or by taking up a yet-to-be-established office of vice president, but there is definite agreement that Mediene is backing Ouyahia. These sources also tell us that Bouteflika and Mediene seek to reshape Algerian politics into two currents: one conservative/Islamist led by PM Belkhadem and a second modernist/nationalist led by Ouyahia.

[1](#)2. (S) Summary (cont'd): Ouyahia confidant and member of parliament Abdesslem Bouchouareb believes that Islah political party leader Abdallah Djaballah's recent "removal" from office (ref A) was in the making for at least two years and that Bouteflika was fully complicit in it. Bouchouareb predicts that the presidential alliance of FLN, RND, and MSP will garner 65 percent of the vote in the May legislative elections and that Ouyahia's party, RND, at a minimum will win between 80 and 90 seats. While not predicting numeric outcomes for the other two alliance parties, Bouchouareb expects the FLN to take the lion's share of the seats and the moderate Islamist Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP) to struggle. End Summary.

RND MOMENTUM, FLN MISSTEPS

[1](#)3. (C) MP Abdesslem Bouchouareb, personal secretary to National Rally for Democracy (RND) head Ahmed Ouyahia, told PolEc Chief March 12 that the RND expects to obtain 25 percent of the vote in the May parliamentary elections. According to Bouchouareb, obtaining a quarter of the vote would translate into 80-90 seats and place the RND second to the National Liberation Front (FLN) of Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem. He further predicted that the presidential alliance composed of the RND, FLN and MSP would collectively win 65 percent of the vote. Bouchouareb posited that the MSP would struggle to do as well as it did in 2002 and would likely lose seats. He believed the predominantly Berber Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), the far-left Workers' Party, and independent candidates -- many loyal to Islah's Djaballah -- would garner the remaining 35 percent

and comprise the opposition.

14. (C) Bouchouareb acknowledged that the Algerian political establishment would watch closely how well the RND performed in the elections, since many consider the RND's fortunes intertwined with those of former PM Ouyahia's chances of succeeding President Bouteflika. Bouchouareb purported to believe that the two events were not related, however, and said that Ouyahia was prepared to serve in any leadership capacity -- be it prime minister, vice president, or eventually president. He asserted that the RND, alone among major Algerian political parties in his view, did not face internal strife. He also expressed satisfaction that the RND stood to gain from any FLN missteps -- just as the FLN scored handsomely over the RND in the 2002 legislative elections when the RND was the largest political party in government. Noting that the RND performed unexpectedly well in the December 2006 senate elections (ref B), Bouchouareb made clear that the party had both the momentum and opportunity to score well in May, since "Belkhadem has his hands full with FLN internal strife." In the end, Bouchouareb confided that his assessment of the RND's chances was intentionally conservative, as it was always better to score better than the public and press expect.

ISLAMISTS VERSUS MODERNISTS

15. (S) Turning to Djaballah's problems with the Ministry of Interior (ref A), Bouchouareb said what happened to Islah "was not unexpected and has been in the planning for at least a couple of years." He said Bouteflika and the head of the intelligence and security directorate, Major General Mohamed Mediene, actively supported the formation of two competing Algerian electoral currents: one conservative/Islamist as embodied by Belkhadem, and the other "modernist" as embodied by the RND. Bouchouareb asserted that there was little difference between Djaballah and Belkhadem "other than the clothes that they wear." As for the MSP, Bouchouareb said its foreign (Muslim Brotherhood) origins ensured that it could not compete over the long term for the Algerian Islamist vote. Noting that the FLN "leftists" had by and large joined the Workers' Party, he said the FLN had become increasingly conservative and Islamist. Meanwhile, the RND remained the modernist, anti-Islamist party. Bouchouareb said that while it was important that both currents work together for the good of the nation, every car could only have one driver: "Those behind the curtain" (i.e. Mediene) "want RND doing the driving," concluded Bouchouareb.

16. (S) Bouchouareb said he expected the newly elected parliament to amend the constitution later this year in order to create the position of vice president. He emphasized that Ouyahia had originally suggested to Bouteflika that any proposed constitutional amendments pass through parliament rather than by popular referendum. The FLN did not support the parliamentary approach, however, so Bouteflika did not pursue it. Bouchouareb, while not saying so explicitly, left the clear impression that he believed Ouyahia was the leading candidate to be the first vice president. Ismail Chikhoune, who heads the U.S.-Algeria Business Council, told the Ambassador in February that Ouyahia was Mediene's choice to become either prime minister or vice president. To prevent Belkhadem from challenging Ouyahia for the presidency before the office of vice president was created, Chikhoune posited that Mediene intended to make Belkhadem senate president following the May elections. As senate president, Belkhadem would briefly become acting president should Bouteflika die in office, but would be barred by the constitution from being a candidate in the elections that would follow. Chikhoune also said that Bouteflika and Mediene had encouraged Ouyahia after he stepped down as prime minister to shore up his base by strengthening and consolidating the RND.

MEDIENE SHAPES ALGERIA'S FUTURE

17. (S) In a separate March 6 conversation with the Ambassador

and PolEc Chief, Union for Democracy and the Republic
Secretary General Amara Benyounes shared Bouchouareb's

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assessment that Mediene was pushing for the creation of a Belkhadem-led conservative/Islamist current alongside a "nationalist" movement under Ouyahia. Benyounes believed that Belkhadem was a spent force politically, and Mediene did not want him to remain prime minister following the May elections. He predicted that Ouyahia, as Mediene's leading candidate to succeed Bouteflika, would be named to that post until the constitution could be amended to create a vice presidency. Benyounes also remarked that Ouyahia was being given time to strengthen the RND and the only result that mattered in the May elections was the RND's score, since Ouyahia's fortunes were linked to it.

COMMENT

18. (S) The RND is the one major political party (with the possible exception of the socialist Workers' Party) that does not visibly suffer from internal divisions. Provided that situation holds through the elections, and if Bouchouareb's electoral prediction of RND gains is accurate, Ouyahia will be strengthened politically. Certainly Bouchouareb is right that the RND gathered momentum from the recent senate elections. More telling is the convergence of opinion from sources close to General Mediene (Benyounes) and former PM Ouyahia (Bouchouareb) that Ouyahia is Mediene's choice to succeed Bouteflika. The theme of two competing currents in Algerian politics, and Bouchouareb's clear linkage of it to Djaballah's misfortunes, strikes us as the best theory to date of the direction in which Algerian politics is headed.

19. (S) Algeria has long been governed, alternately more and less behind the scenes, by varying groups of men known collectively as "le pouvoir" ("the power"). In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the "pouvoir" now consists primarily of Mediene and Bouteflika. With Bouteflika's health in question, Mediene appears to be providing much behind-the-scenes guidance and influence on Algeria's future direction. In a telling statement, Benyounes remarked that Mediene was making preparations for Ouyahia to succeed President Bouteflika even though the latter "hates Ouyahia." Based on the totality of the conversations reported here, it appears that Mediene aims to have Ouyahia replace Belkhadem as prime minister following the May elections and plans to thwart Belkhadem's presidential ambitions by moving him to the senate. As prime minister, Ouyahia would push constitutional changes through parliament to create a vice presidential post, which he would then occupy to await Bouteflika's departure.

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